Look Before You Push

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The press has billed push-media products as the Next Big Thing. Content providers, sponsors, and investors all hope push technology will provide the medium to carry their messages to audiences broad enough to finally turn new media into mass media. It isn't going to happen as soon as the press releases would have you believe, though. There are some serious hurdles to be cleared before the new "webcasting" model will eclipse Web surfing.

For consumers, push technology that goes beyond PointCast and In-Box Direct is still too far ahead of its target market to be adopted in millions of homes. There are several competent delivery systems already shipping, but each vendor - such as PointCast, Marimba, BackWeb - requires the user to register, download, and install a special player, and then subscribe to "channels" built for that player only. The pragmatic majority will wait for a canned solution that doesn't require special installation, operating knowledge, or hunting for content. Consuming push content needs to be as easy as watching TV before it will really catch on.

Not ones to miss such an obvious point, Microsoft and Netscape are racing to bundle push-media delivery systems into their next-generation browsers for instant use. The battle has already spilled out of the browser window onto HTML-rendered desktops, with full-screen push-media channels alternately known as premium channels or Live sites. But don't trade your Magnavox for a bigger Mac display just yet. The fully functioning versions of both companies' software won't be released until summer.

Even then you'll find yourself having to choose between Microsoft's built-in channels and Netscape's built-in channels. Each approach has its own format for just about everything: Web pages (Microsoft's Dynamic HTML versus Netscape's very different dynamic HTML), servers (Microsoft has signed deals with BackWeb and PointCast, while Netscape has adopted Marimba), configuration files (Channel Definition Format from Microsoft, with Netscape still withholding an announced spec), downloadable programs (ActiveX vs. Java, sort of), and video (which may be delivered in any number of formats). Not even the VHS/Betamax choice was ever so discouraging.

I run all three - Marimba, PointCast, and BackWeb - viewing platforms simultaneously myself, but the nearly 12 Mbytes of memory used just to fire up the three viewers would stop many would-be push potatoes long before the incompatible user interfaces did. Even on Windows 95, where push players are at their most advanced, they still consume memory and slow down the computer intolerably. Macintosh, WebTV, and Unix players are even further behind in development.

There's another bottleneck slowing push media's wide deployment. It will take more Internet bandwidth than ever - maybe 10 times more - to deliver the graphically intense, frequently upgraded multimedia content that makes a push "channel" more than just a persistent Web page. On top of this, the push paradigm encourages users to download more than they plan to look at. The smart and lazy among us

will let their computers run all day or all night while they're away from them, filling their disks with newly pushed content daily. Users with bits to move in real time will be frustrated with the molasses pace that massive bandwidth hogs will produce. If you resented PointCast for slowing up your local network with news stories, wait until live video feeds, adult entertainment subscriptions, and things you didn't really ask for are all being pushed through your ISP or intranet.